Martin SWCD Preserves Rare Plant Species through Native Buffer Projects

Featured Project

Conservation projects to restore native prairies and wetlands involve harvesting and planting seeds originating from native populations of grasses and flowers. The sources of available species is rapidly decreasing. The Martin Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is working to preserve about 100 native plant species that are currently surviving in remnant prairie areas in Martin County.

The SWCD received a grant through the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to establish a native buffer program, which provides grants to local landowners to plant filter strips or buffers around wells and along surface water bodies. These projects help protect and improve water quality while preserving and increasing the amount of native plant material available for future restoration projects.

A primary focus is to provide a source for local ecotype native species that are currently unavailable and species that seem to be rare and/or in decline locally. Martin SWCD staff harvest native seeds by hand and establish them in areas that are best suited for a particular plant. The range of species includes sedges and other plants that thrive in wetlands, and drought-tolerant grasses and flowers that are found in upland areas.

Increasing populations of these species to the point where seed supplies can be provided to growers is the next step in expanding their usage and helping with their long-term survival. The Native Buffer Cost Share program sites provide the perfect environment for expanding native plant populations and the resulting supply of plant materials. The Minnesota Crop Improvement Association has inspected the native collection sites as well as the planting sites and the genetic origin of the plant materials is being tracked. The SWCD is working with MN Crop to maintain “Yellow Tag” eligibility of these plant materials for future habitat restoration work.

Rare native plants being preserved by the Martin SWCD include (from top) Sullivant’s Milkweed, Pasque Flower, and Tuberous Indian Plantain.

The SWCD has also received grants from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) for the project. Getting new local ecotype native plant species to the market through growers and vendors is a major focus with the latest LCCMR proposal.

Location: Martin County

BWSR Featured Project

Partners: The Fox Lake Conservation League, Fox Lake Association, Watonwan Pheasants, FSA, NRCS, DNR, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, County, Townships, many landowners, BWSR, and the LCCMR.

Project Timeline: The idea of moving local ecotype native plant species into areas protected by perpetual conservation easements began with a Private Stewardship Grant (PSG) through the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2003. In 2008 Martin SWCD received a grant from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) to further the work of the "Prairie Ecosystem Restoration Project." A second ENRTF project has been recommended for funding by the LCCMR. Grants from BWSR through the Cooperative Weed Management Area were received in 2008 and 2010. Native Buffer Program funds were received in 2008, 2009 and 2011. Monitoring and weed control will be needed for many years to aid in project success.

Project Costs / Funding Sources: The original PSG grant was for $77,500 with a $10,000 local match provided by landowners, SWCDs, MN DNR, Fox Lake Conservation League ($5,000), Fox Lake Association ($1,000), and Watonwan Chapter of MN Pheasants Forever ($2,000). In 2008 the LCCMR provided $80,000 to further the efforts along with $43,779 in local match. The pending 2011 LCCMR project is for $147,000 with a $35,000 local match. Moving forward, the Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA) grant ($16,000 and $15,000) and the Native Buffer Cost-Share Program ($15,000, $56,250 and $135,000) have been adapted locally to remove invasive species and replace them with local ecotype native plant species.

Keys to Success: Martin SWCD staff has worked with local landowners to plant rare species in sites where they are protected and have the greatest opportunity to become established, and where they provide the greatest benefits for water quality, such as near wells, tile intakes, lakes, streams and within and around wetlands. Local partnerships between agencies and organizations have helped create awareness and stretch funds. The Fox Lake Conservation League provided a little more than the required 25% local match for the current CWMA grant, stretching it from $15,000 to $20,000.

BWSR role: BWSR administers the Native Buffer Program and the CWMA grant program and has awarded competitive grants to the Martin SWCD through both programs. BWSR also provides guidance and serves as the fiscal agent for the ENRTF funding received by the SWCD.

Measurable Outcomes: Before and after erosion and sediment delivery are calculated on riparian projects. The projects reduce or eliminate chemical weed control near wells and push other impacts and pollution sources further away from water resources. Increased carbon sequestration is also provided by native species. Providing habitat diversity and protecting declining, at-risk species is at the top of the priority list for this initiative. On one site, Red-winged blackbirds were building nests in native plants before the wetlands had even been restored.

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